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Training Needs Survey

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Training Needs Survey

The Science Council of BC has undertaken this survey as part of an interest in human resource development in science and technology. Part of this commitment is to develop job skills in science and technology.

Background

This survey was undertaken to explore the issues surrounding training in high technology companies, with a view to developing programming to provide assistance to the industry. There were three key areas we sought to explore. First, we wanted to examine the current training practices of high technology companies. Second, we wanted to see what the real or perceived problems in training delivery were. Finally, we wanted to see if there was a similarity in what companies felt were deficits in training delivery.

Methodology

This interactive web-based survey was geared for response by human resource managers or those employees who have direct responsibility for managing staff. We relied on e-mail, word of mouth, other web linkages and e-newsletters such as T-net British Columbia and the Technical Industry Association's *Talk*. The survey remained active on SCBC's web-site for two months, and there were no known instances where the survey was malfunctioning. Respondents were not required to answer every question, including the anecdotal questions.

While the survey did not have enough respondents (27) to allow for reliable extrapolation of the numbers to represent the entire industry, we were able to trace some common themes in the responses. Due to the low numbers of responses we have ignored answers to questions that did not have a significant response rate.

Results

Most of the responses were from companies in the Lower Mainland (21), with three from Vancouver Island and one from the Interior. Two respondents declined to give their location. None of the companies responded to the question about company size.

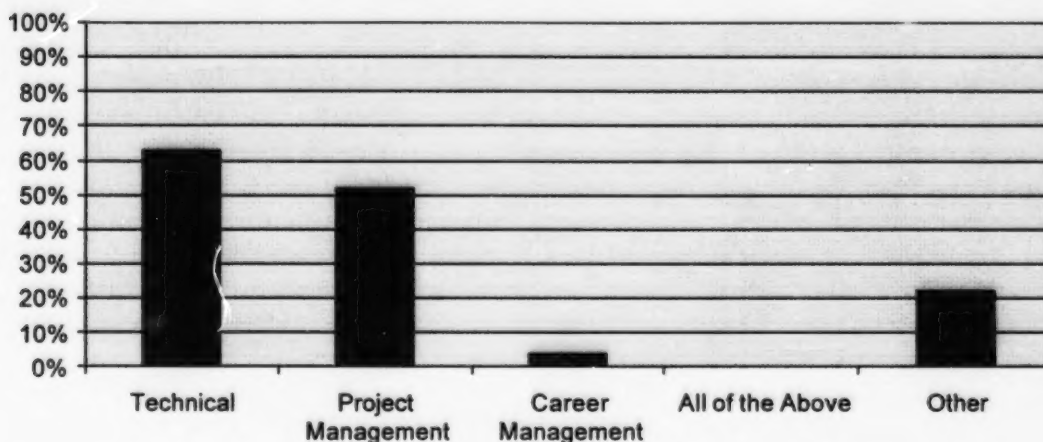
Current training practices

The survey asked respondents to answer various questions about their current training practices. The majority of respondents (65%) replied that they did have some sort of company-wide training strategy in place. However, this training strategy was not necessarily conceived of by a human resources department as of the respondents only 10 had a human resource manager.

When respondents were asked to describe some of the main aspects of the training strategy, answers varied from full to partial reimbursement of courses as well as time off from work to take courses. While not all companies had specific training strategies in place, 100% of the respondents offered either technical or project management courses to their employees. Only one respondent provided some type of personal career

management course, while additional answers ranged from sales and marketing courses to leadership training.

Training Offered



Half of the respondents also felt they were able to give workers time off to take courses not directly related to projects they were working on.

"Supporting employees with in-house training and tuition reimbursement is critical and necessary. The growth of employees is very important and expected from employees within the high tech sector."

The respondents were split over the question of the relationship of training to retention. Fourteen answered that they felt that retention was ~~issue~~ which affected training, while 10 did not.

"Our challenge is having all the leadership of the organization seeing learning and development as a key strategic initiative in growing our business and making us even more successful."

Possible/perceived deficits in training delivery

Even with these strategies in place, only 26% of respondents felt that their workers got the training they needed.

"Our particular area of the high tech industry requires technical expertise in 3 areas - hardware, network and programming. We send our technical people on the job throughout North America to customer's sites. To date, we have trained on the job. However we are getting to a size whereby we are willing to look at other means of training our technical people."

This may explain why 60% of the respondents felt that they would be willing to spend more money on training. Currently, the respondents spend between 1-3% of their total expenditures on training. Most of the expenditures on courses are considered a separate expense (82%) from compensation budgets. In asking about this practice, we sought to uncover whether companies consider training as part of compensation. If so, we can assume that training is one of the benefits used to recruit and retain workers. If not, this would give us some indication of the need to raise awareness of the link between training and compensation.

Seventy-two percent of the respondents had a turnover rate was of less than 10%. In addition, 68% of those responding felt that their turnover rate was not high. It is interesting that the turnover rate is so low, considering the current media coverage surrounding retention of high-tech workers. Yet the BC TIA report card supports our turnover finding.

We also wanted to discover if local public and private institutions were meeting the training need of the industry. Only six of the respondents answered yes, while 12 responded no, and 7 didn't know. Suggestions on possible courses ranged from communication skills to business training for engineers. A common thread throughout the answers was a need for more technical skill-specific courses. Through long-answer questions, we can conclude that most of the respondents create in-house programs, buy course software or have trained personnel on the job.

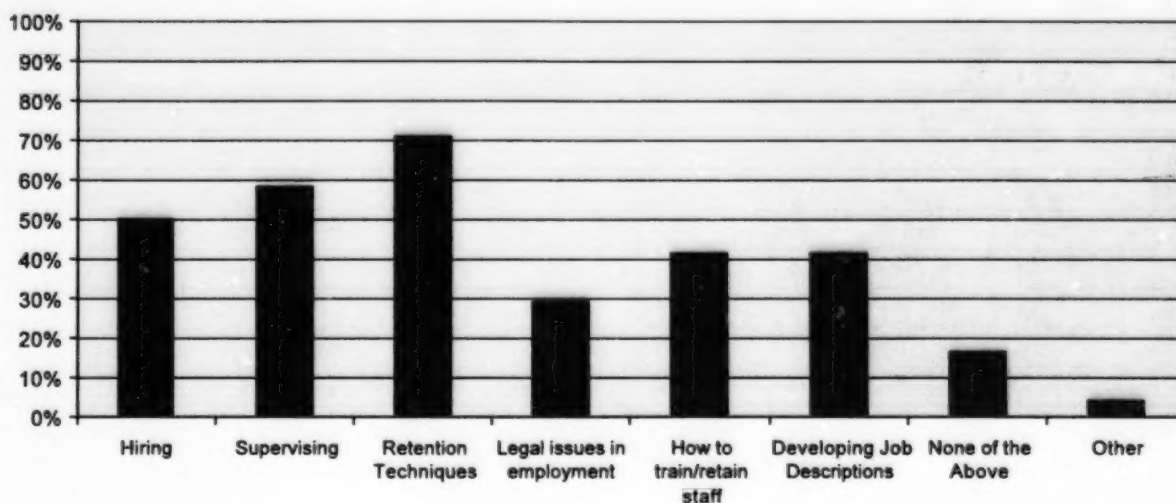
"We have been training individuals in Business Units to act as trainers for company-specific training and anticipate that this program will be very successful and an attraction to new employees."

Industry-wide issues

In conducting this survey, we also wanted to determine if there was a consensus on the training needs of the industry. An overwhelming 89% of the respondents answered that their training needs are similar to others in the industry. Additionally, 48% responded that their problems were the same as those faced in other companies. However, only 44% of those responded that their training needs could be met through industry collaboration, 33% did not know if this was a possibility.

When asked if assistance in instituting a training strategy may be useful, 14 out of the 27 responded affirmatively. A follow-up question asked all respondents what type of training would be of interest, specific to the human resource area. Twenty of the respondents replied that they would like some sort of training, with the majority (17) interested in retention techniques in the technical workplace. Interestingly, of the 17 who were interested in this course, 14 responded that they did not feel their turnover rate was too high.

Table 2 – Would you be interested in training (in the technical workplace) on any of the following topics:



Conclusions

Overall, this survey succeeded in giving a snapshot of the training issues in the high - technology sector. However, it should be reiterated that this survey not be extrapolated to represent the entire industry, given the low numbers of respondents. This low number is not necessarily surprising, given the response rates for other surveys on issues in the human resources field, where more concentrated time was given to garnering response. In the future, Science Council may want to continue the use of surveys as they are a less time consuming process for staff to undertake in terms of distribution of the survey. Suggestions for garnering a greater response rate include:

- Contract a professional survey firm to devote their expertise to garnering responses;
- Increase visibility of the survey through advertising in the BC TIA Monitor and other industry publications;
- Create more web-site linkages and banners on relevant websites, as well as flashing graphics on SCBC's home page

The results show that current training practices in high- tech companies are positive in that all provide some training for their staff. Yet most do not feel that their employees get the training they need. This strongly supports the theory that there is a need to develop an industry-wide model for training practices in high- technology companies. This strategy should not necessarily be limited solely to planning technical training. Rather, it can:

- Be an opportunity to develop a way in which employees receive both technical and soft-skill training, such as leadership and project management.

- A strategy to also include career management programs for staff, in that their motivation to get the training they need is not only linked to current employment but future career goals.

The responses demonstrate that there may be a lack of training courses for HR professionals, working specifically in high technology, or a lack of publicity surrounding these courses. Possible options for SCBC action in this area are:

- To create partnerships with organizations such as the Human Resource Managers Association (HRMA) in order to catalogue current high technology specific HR programs and to identify gaps.
- Once these gaps are identified, new seminars could be created or facilitated, based on the responses given in our survey. Based on the survey, the primary area where seminars should be constructed should be on retention techniques in the high-technology workforce.
- Create additional partnerships with government organisations such as Human Resource Development Canada and the B.C. Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology

If SCBC should choose to pursue seminars or information sessions, one factor that may be taken under consideration is that most of the companies did not perceive training as a retention issue. This is not entirely surprising given the low turnover rates which were given, and the divide between compensation and training. In this case, it may be more effective to focus on awareness of training as a recruitment issue and the leverage training can give to compensation packages. This action is supported by findings in studies such as the KPMG/ CATA study *Attracting and Retaining High -Tech Workers* (June 1998) which found that training and development was a more important factor than salary in an employees selection of an employer.

Another option available in developing seminars, is a partnership with training institutions such as UBC, SFU, Open Learning Agency and private training institutions to promote BC training options for high- tech workers. Currently, most respondents do not feel that traditional institutions can deliver technical training for them. In facilitating the information flow between industry and training deliverers, SCBC could help increase the number and quality of training courses here in BC by showing the demand for such courses.

The one note of caution that Science Council may want to take into account, is the perception that technical needs are different across the industry, thus creating barriers to industry-wide solutions. However, most of the respondents felt that there was a commonality in the industry in terms of training problems. This provides another opportunity for Science Council investigation to provide examples in the BC and international context, where companies have worked together to provide solution to their training needs.